

## THE UNITED STATES AND TURKEY: REDEFINING A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**THE UNITED STATES AND TURKEY:  
REDEFINING A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The United States is currently involved in a struggle against Islamic extremism. Although many Americans view this struggle as a war against terrorism, the true nature of the conflict is primarily a struggle of opposing ideas and values. Islamic extremists portray liberal democratic ideas as a threat to the Islamic world and its values. The United States and its Western allies argue democratic institutions and values promote political stability, respect for equality, freedom, and human rights. Turkey has the potential to play a vital role in this struggle of ideas and values that has defined the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Turkey thrives as a society that successfully blends Islamic and Western values. Turkey possesses a history that is both Islamic and democratic. The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of Turkey's growing status as a regional power on United States foreign policy in the region. This paper will also explore how the United States can reorient and refocus its strategic partnership with Turkey in order to better achieve United States' interests in the region and in the struggle against Islamic extremism.





## THE UNITED STATES AND TURKEY: REDEFINING A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Turkey's greatness lies in your ability to be at the center of things. This is not where East and West divide—this is where they come together.

—Barack Obama<sup>1</sup>

During the early months of the Korean War, military recruiters spread throughout the Turkish country side seeking volunteers to serve in a Turkish Brigade bound for Korea. In June 1950, North Korean forces invaded South Korea and the United States, Turkey's close ally, needed help. Ultimately 15,000 Turkish volunteers fought in the Turkish Brigade in Korea. The Brigade earned a ferocious reputation in combat and over 700 of its Soldiers fell in battle.<sup>2</sup> Fifty-two years later, the United States again called for Turkey's help during a time of war. The United States asked Turkey to allow its forces to pass through Turkey and invade Northern Iraq as part of the U.S. plan to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein. The Turkish Parliament voted down approval for U.S. forces to invade Iraq through Turkey, severely straining relations between the two countries. The relationship between the two long time allies was further damaged a little over a year later on 4 July 2004, when U.S. paratroopers operating out of Kirkuk, Iraq captured and detained a group of Turkish Special Forces soldiers in the Iraqi city of Suleymania.<sup>3</sup> Polling data from the German Marshall Fund noted a steady and sharp decline in the Turkish public's support for NATO, dropping from 53% in 2004 to 37% in 2008. These numbers reflect the lowest level of support for the alliance in any NATO country.<sup>4</sup> In this paper I will explore how Turkey and its long standing strategic allies in the West have reached such a low point. Does this nadir in relations between Turkey and its Western allies signal a larger movement in Turkey to

turn away from the West and pursue a more independent and perhaps a less secular path? The answer to these questions lies in the changing strategic environment of the post Cold War world and Turkey's growing influence as a regional power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The end of the Cold War allowed long suppressed regional issues in Central Asia to reemerge and influence Turkey's national interests. Turkey no longer needed a monolithic foreign policy supporting the U.S. and the West's anticommunism.<sup>5</sup> The fall of the Soviet Union freed Turkey to pursue her own course in the region. U.S. policy on the other hand failed to recognize the changes to the strategic environment brought by the end of the Cold War. In a recent article in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, Robert Mallery and Peter Harling described the U.S.'s continued reliance on a Cold War era view of the world in developing foreign policy:

Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. policy makers stuck to a Cold War-era approach to foreign policy: dividing the world between faithful friends and well defined foes, anchoring diplomacy in relatively stable bilateral relationships, and relying on allies to promote clear-cut interests and contain enemies.<sup>6</sup>

Mallery and Harling further note the U.S. approach to policy continued to function in the 1990's because the U.S. emerged from the Cold War unchallenged as the world's sole superpower. Today this model has become obsolete due to the rise of regional powers across the globe, like Turkey, willing to challenge the U.S. as these states pursue their own national interests.

This change in the strategic environment has particularly strained the relationship between Turkey and her NATO allies. Turkey's post Cold War interests involve improving relations with Turkey's Eastern neighbors such as Syria and Iran. Simultaneously, Islam has reemerged as an influential force in Turkish public life. The moderately pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party (identified by its Turkish initials

AKP) has governed Turkey since 2002. The success of the AKP marks an important turning point in Turkish politics and society. After eighty years of looking West, Turkey is returning to an even older tradition, reminiscent of its Ottoman heritage of melding both Eastern and Western traditions. This nationalist strategy of taking the best from both Eastern and Western traditions positions Turkey to assume a more important role on the world stage. Many Turks, including Turkey's dynamic Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, believe the time is right for Turkey to take its place as a regional power in Central Asia.<sup>7</sup> This fact has many in the West concerned that Turkey is abandoning its 88 year history of westernization and democratic reform. Headlines such as "Turkish Menace"<sup>8</sup> and "What is happening to Turkey"<sup>9</sup> in the Western media reflects Western concern for the future of Turkey.

The purpose of this paper is to explore Turkey's growing status as a power in Central Asia and the Middle East and its impact on U.S. foreign policy in the region. In this paper I will argue the United States must reorient and refocus its strategic partnership with Turkey in order to better achieve U.S. interests in the region and in the struggle against Islamic extremism. The U.S. must acknowledge Turkey's growing influence and strive to redefine its partnership based on shared interests and objectives in the region. As former New York Times reporter and author, Stephen Kinser notes: "The combination of Turkey's location, its Ottoman heritage, and its successful blend of Islam and democracy gives it enormous strategic potential."<sup>10</sup> Carefully crafted policies can restore and strengthen the strategic partnership between the U.S. and Turkey to the mutual benefit of both states.

## Turkey Looks West

The Republic of Turkey, like the United States, was the creation of war and a bold political experiment.<sup>11</sup> In 1918 the victorious Western allies prepared to occupy and dismember the Ottoman Empire. Turks under the leadership of Turkey's greatest World War I military leader, Mustafa Kemal, were able to overcome their Western occupiers and form a new Turkish state in Anatolia. Kemal quickly consolidated power to become the new Turkish state's first leader. Kemal's vision for a modern Turkish state was based on western political institutions and secular values. Much like his 19<sup>th</sup> Century modernizing predecessors in Germany, Italy, and Japan, Kemal (later known as Kemal Ataturk meaning "father of the Turks"<sup>12</sup>) followed a path of political and social reform as a means to establish an independent and viable Turkish state.<sup>13</sup> Turks particularly admired America's vibrant culture and political freedoms.<sup>14</sup> Kemal began his modernization program with dramatic social reforms such as the transformation of the Turkish alphabet from Arabic to Roman characters, banning the traditional Ottoman Fez, legalizing alcohol, and developing a western based legal system.<sup>15</sup> These reforms established the roots of secular public life in Turkey divorced largely from the traditions of Islam. This new secular public sphere created something unique, a predominantly Muslim population governed by an independent Western style state. Islam itself did not wither in Turkey. It now coexisted with the Republic's secular values creating a more complex social context.

Kemal initially faced widespread resistance to his reform efforts. Many Turks were still shocked by his decision to abolish the sultanate and replace it with a Turkish Republic.<sup>16</sup> Only Kemal's singular determination and vision as well as his reputation as the father of the new Turkish Republic ensured success. Kemal's approach to those

who resisted his reforms is reflected in the motto of his Republican People's Party: "For the People, in Spite of the People."<sup>17</sup>

The establishment of the Turkish Republic in October 1923 also established a western style parliamentary government but true democratic reforms, however, followed more slowly. Like many autocrats, Mustafa Kemal possessed little patience for those opposed to his reforms. Kemal dealt harshly with political opponents. In the 1920's Kemal used martial law to arrest and in many cases, execute his political opponents.<sup>18</sup> It was not until 1950 that Turkey experienced truly democratic, multiparty elections. The 1950 elections in Turkey were a remarkable example of Turkey's continued pro-Western, pro-democratic development even after the death Mustafa Kemal in 1938. As Bernard Lewis proclaimed in the pages of *Foreign Affairs* shortly after the 1950 election, the defeat of the Republican People's Party founded by Kemal marked a significant step in the evolution of Turkish democracy.

The transfer of power by a free election was certainly a bloodless revolution, no less important in its way than the establishment of the republic in 1923. But it must be remembered that it was a revolution in which both defeated and victorious parties shared, and that the election was the culminating point of an evolution towards parliamentary democracy extending over years.<sup>19</sup>

Turkey's developing political institutions survived an important test in 1950. The peaceful transfer of power is a hallmark of a maturing democracy and promised domestic stability. Turkey's next set of challenges would come on the international front with the growing Cold War between East and West. This conflict would further strengthen Turkey's ties with the West.

In the aftermath of World War II, the Soviet Union hoped to dominate Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Stalin ruthlessly eliminated nascent democratic movements

in Eastern Europe and tried to impose his will on states he considered within the Soviet sphere of influence. Stalin hoped to bully the Turkish Republic into becoming a Soviet “vassal state”.<sup>20</sup> The Soviets demanded basing rights along the Turkish Straits and pressured Turkey to surrender territory lost by Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Stalin backed up these demands by moving Red Army units to the Turkish border.<sup>21</sup> In the United States, the Truman Administration responded by asking for \$400 million in aid to Turkey and Greece.<sup>22</sup> In the newly emerging Truman Doctrine, designed to contain the Soviets, Turkey became an important bulwark against Soviet expansion in Central Asia.<sup>23</sup> The Cold War further “underlined Turkey’s decision to orient its society and institutions toward integration with the transatlantic community.”<sup>24</sup> Turkey formalized its links with the West when it joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952.<sup>25</sup>

While the Cold War forced Turkey to look West to achieve its national security interests, internally Turkey continued to struggle to maintain a truly democratic government. The 1950 election was an important milestone, but political challenges (and often turmoil) lay ahead in the coming decades. Turkey’s military, especially the Army, believed they were the defenders of Kemalism - the legacy of a strong, secular Turkish state. As a result of this belief, Turkey’s military elite tolerated democracy and democratic dissent only to a certain degree.<sup>26</sup> The military would not hesitate to intervene in domestic politics if they believed there was a threat to the Kemalist state. Between 1960 and 2000, four military coups (1960, 1971, 1980, and 1996) toppled elected civilian governments and forced constitutional changes upon the state. In each case the military believed its intervention was necessary to save the state.<sup>27</sup> The military would act quickly and ruthlessly if necessary. For example, the Army deemed it

necessary to put the elected prime minister, Adnan Menderes on trial and ultimately execute him in the aftermath of the 1960 coup.<sup>28</sup> Unlike other developing states that often fall to military rule, the Turkish military never maintained absolute power for long in the wake of a coup. Most Turks viewed the military as the protector of Turkey's stability. Turks feared that political upheaval might usher in a new, more radical form of government.<sup>29</sup> Turkey's democratic institutions would continue to develop slowly throughout the Cold War period under the watchful eye of the military. As democratic institutions strengthened in Turkey, the military's ability to control Turkish politics inversely declined. The military remained a stalwart defender of Kemal Ataturk's legacy of a secular republic, yet it was now forced to contend with more assertive civilian leaders eager to benefit from the Turkish people's desire to control their own political destiny.

#### Rising Regional Power at a Crossroads

The end of the Cold War dramatically changed Turkey's strategic and domestic political environments. The collapse of the Soviet Union freed Turkey to focus on a more regionally focused foreign policy. Turkey naturally viewed itself as the protector of the newly independent Turkic states in the Caucasus and Central Asia.<sup>30</sup> Soon, Turkey began to see itself in the wider strategic context of a rising power in multiple regions based on its fortunate geography and socio-religious history. Turkey's foreign policy sought to achieve what it termed "strategic depth" involving the establishment of Turkey's influence across five broad regions: the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Caspian Sea region, and the Mediterranean basin as well.<sup>31</sup> Turkey also

sought to strengthen economic and diplomatic ties with its immediate neighbors to include traditional regional rivals Iran and Russia.

During the 1990s, American policy failed to recognize Turkey's growing regional influence in the Post Cold War world. U.S. policy continued to see the world through the bi-polar lens of the Cold War, "dividing the world between faithful friends and well defined foes, anchoring diplomacy in relatively stable bilateral relationships, and relying on allies to promote clear-cut interests and contain enemies."<sup>32</sup> Washington, caught up in its own exuberance over the end of the Cold War and the U.S. victory over Saddam Hussein in 1991, failed to understand and adapt to Turkey's emerging new role in the strategic environment. In simple terms, the U.S. took its long standing relationship with Turkey for granted. U.S. policy makers assumed Turkey's strong secular and pro-Western orientation would continue without change after the fall of the Soviet Union. Preoccupied with trying to determine their own role in the new world order, U.S. observers failed to note the subtle shift of political power away from the military within Turkey and the emergence of a renewed sense of Turkish nationalism. This failure to understand Turkey's emerging role in the Post Cold War world would lead to growing tensions in 2003 and beyond when U.S. returned to Iraq.

The end of the Cold War also allowed Turkey to undergo dramatic changes on the domestic economic and political fronts. Under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Turgut Ozal, Turkey experienced rapid economic development and continued political reform. With his election in 1983, Ozal worked to transform Turkey economically from a sharply protectionist state into a robust free market economy.<sup>33</sup> As Kinser notes, "Ozal sensed the vibrancy that lay beneath the surface of Turkish society.



He realized that if it could be liberated, Turkey would not only break out of its isolation but become dynamic, prosperous, and powerful.”<sup>34</sup> Ozal instituted economic and government reforms promoting trade and business development that continue to fuel Turkey’s economic growth today.<sup>35</sup>

Politically, Ozal set a precedent for challenging the military’s traditional role in protecting what it viewed as Turkey’s best interests and thus weakening civilian control of the state. Ozal challenged the established social elites in Turkish society who were strong supporters of the military. In an important symbolic gesture of political independence, Ozal had the body of Adnan Menderes, the former prime minister the military had tried and executed in 1960, reburied with full military honors.<sup>36</sup> Ozal’s success on both the economic and political fronts energized Turks to confidently engage in the new post Cold War world order. Emboldened by their new found economic success and emerging status as an influential power in multiple geostrategic regions, Turks demanded more domestic political freedoms and a re-evaluation of Turkey’s relationship with the West.

The first issue that prompted Turks and their leaders to question their links to the West involved Turkey’s desire to join the European Union (EU). Turks strongly believe they are part of the European community. The Turkish Republic and the Ottoman Empire that preceded it, played an important role in shaping Europe’s past and present.<sup>37</sup> Kemal Ataturk’s nationalist project to build a secular state in Anatolia based on Western institutions further solidified Turkey’s ties to Europe. Subsequent Turkish governments continued to follow Ataturk’s vision of a modern, westernized Turkey linked to Europe. In 1963 Turkey signed an Association Agreement with the then

European Economic Community and in 1995 Turkey established a customs union with the EU.<sup>38</sup> In 1999 Turkey became a candidate for full EU membership.<sup>39</sup>

Unfortunately, the process of Turkey achieving full EU membership has been fraught with delays and frustration. When confronted with the possibility of full membership in the EU, many European states began to have second thoughts about Turkey joining the European community. A number of Europeans questioned Turkey's commitment to human rights and continued political reforms required for EU membership. Some European states, such as France and Germany, fear the cultural influence of a predominantly Muslim nation 71 million strong and growing on European society.<sup>40</sup> If Turkey joined the EU today, it would be the second largest member state and with its growing population, it likely would become the largest member state in the near future.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, Turkey's membership in the EU would expand the borders of Europe into the Caucasus and the Middle East thus directly linking Europe with these volatile regions.<sup>42</sup>

Turkey's frustrations with delays in the EU accession process have forced Turkey to look for economic and cultural ties with its neighbor states in the Middle East and Central Asia.<sup>43</sup> Turkey has participated in the process to join the European community since 1960 when it concluded an Association Agreement with the European Community.<sup>44</sup> Successive Turkish governments have enacted a number of political and economic reforms in order to meet the requirements to join the European community. Just as Turks begin to see a successful end to the membership process, the EU has applied the brakes. Such European second thoughts have come at a pivotal time for Turkey's future and its relationship with the West. As Steven Kinser notes, "Europe is

slamming its door in Turkey's face. Turkey, a proud country that does not react well to insults, is responding by seeking friends elsewhere".<sup>45</sup> Europe's recent sovereign debt crisis has also tarnished the EU's promise for continued economic growth and prosperity. As a recent wall Street Journal report noted, "Turks now look on the EU with diminishing envy and growing contempt."<sup>46</sup> This report further noted that Greece, Turkey's one time nemesis and current EU member, is viewed by many Turks with pity do to the impact of the Greek debt crisis.<sup>47</sup>

The second event that forced Turks to question their current relationship with the West and the United States in particular was the U.S. led invasion of Iraq in 2003. During the first Gulf War in 1991 and subsequent operations in Northern Iraq (Operations Provide Comfort and Northern Watch), Turkey provided much needed logistical support to the U.S and coalition mission. In return, Washington offered Ankara economic incentives to offset any economic damage brought on by coalition operations in Iraq. Iraq at the time was Turkey's largest trading partner.<sup>48</sup> Washington's failure to deliver on these promises of economic assistance made a lasting impression on the Turkish public and its leaders. In 2002, a report commissioned by the Turkish general staff noted that Turkey's support for the first Gulf War had not been worth the economic costs to the country.<sup>49</sup> The Turkish military leadership counseled caution in evaluating the motives of U.S. future actions in the region.<sup>50</sup> The enduring memory of the U.S.'s failure to follow through on its promises of economic support to Turkey in 1991 unquestionably factored in to the political decision for Turkey to not support the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>51</sup> Turkey feared an unstable Iraq in the aftermath of an

American invasion would have devastating consequences for Turkey and the entire region.

These economic concerns combined with growing interests and influence in the region underlined Turkey's decision to reject supporting the U.S. led invasion. In fact, Turkey's opposition to the American led invasion of Iraq has significantly strengthened Turkey's influence in the region.<sup>52</sup> Many states in the Middle East and Central Asia view Turkey as a viable alternative to Iran and the U.S. as the chief power broker in the region.<sup>53</sup> Turkey's rising influence built primarily around diplomacy with all its neighbors and expanding regional economic prosperity is a stark contrast with Iran's virulently anti-Israel and anti-Western strategic objectives.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, the continued presence of large numbers of U.S. forces operating in Afghanistan and Iraq have forced Turkey to develop closer relations with regional rivals including Iran and Syria.<sup>55</sup> As Turkey continues to develop economic and political ties with its regional neighbors, it will become increasingly difficult, if not impossible for Turkey to maintain its traditional pro-Western outlook.<sup>56</sup>

The third major factor that has shaped the way Turks look at their relationship with Europe and the United States involves the re-emergence of Islam as an important role in Turkey's public sphere. One of the founding principles of the Turkish Republic is the separation of church and state.<sup>57</sup> The 2003 ascension of the pro-Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) under the leadership of Tayyip Erdogan raised concerns among many of Turkey's elites (particularly military and business leaders) that Islamists wanted to undermine Turkey's traditions of secularism and political moderation. Since the election of Erdogan as Turkey's prime minister in 2002 and later the election of

fellow AKP leader Abdullah Gul as Turkey's President in 2007, Turks, along with many western observers have debated the meaning of the AKP's political success. Western media reports with titles such as "What is Happening to Turkey"<sup>58</sup> and "Turkish Menace"<sup>59</sup> indicate the level of concern in the West over Turkey's future as a pro-Western democracy. Western observers continue to disagree whether Turkey is simply trying to modernize its political system within the context of its Islamic past or does the AKP intend to take Turkey down a path to becoming an Islamic republic? Prime Minister Erdogan and his supporters argue they have no interest in challenging Turkey's secular roots. AKP supporters believe Turkey has reached a stage in its political development where the country can acknowledge its strong historic and cultural Islamic traditions without challenging the state's democratic institutions.<sup>60</sup>

Many in Turkey support the idea that Turkey's Ottoman past provides a model for a more influential role for Islam in Turkish society. Advocates of Neo-Ottomanism see Turkey as a growing power where the "strategic vision and culture reflect the geographic reach of the Ottoman and Byzantine Empires".<sup>61</sup> A key element in Neo-Ottomanism focuses on Islam's important role "in terms of building a sense of shared identity" in Turkey.<sup>62</sup> The central question for many Turks and for Western policy makers is how will Islam's resurgent role in Turkish politics and society shape Turkey's future as a democratic state.

### Strategic Common Ground

"History teaches us that uncertain ambitions combined with growing capabilities breed fear."<sup>63</sup> Turkey's growing prosperity and ambitions to assume on a larger role in several strategically important regions has in fact bred, if not fear, then certainly a sense

of overall concern about Turkey's future as a secular democracy and Western ally. A close examination of the strategic context of Turkey's growing regional influence and Turkey's strategic interests reveals a great deal in common with U.S. and European interests.

First, like the U.S., Turkey benefits from the status quo of the established world order.<sup>64</sup> The foundation of Turkey's new found influence in the Middle East and in Central Asia rests on continued economic and political stability. Starting with its immediate neighbors, Turkey has followed a policy of "zero problems"<sup>65</sup> in order to avoid or resolve any potential problems, including long standing rivalries with Iran and Russia. Already the seventh largest economy in Europe and the fifteenth largest in the world, Turkey's economic future relies on stability in the many regions it touches.<sup>66</sup> For example, Turkey has put aside its differences with Syria in order to "cement Turkey's position as a vital economic and political bridge between east and west".<sup>67</sup> For their part, the Syrians see Turkey as a vital link to European markets and goods.<sup>68</sup> Trade between Turkey and Syria doubled from \$795 million in 2006 to \$1.6 billion in 2009.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Turkey has expanded its economic ties with both Russia and Iran.<sup>70</sup> Russia continues to be Turkey's largest trading partner and a major supplier of natural gas and investment fueling Turkey's growing economy.<sup>71</sup> As Turkey continues to prosper economically, its interests will continue to rely on regional political stability. Turkey's economic success also presents an alternative to Islam as a unifying and stabilizing force in the Middle East.<sup>72</sup> Turkey's growing political and economic influence and the methods in which it achieved these gains provide both the U.S. and Turkey opportunities to work together to find common ground in achieving mutual interests in

the region. In Iraq for example, Turkey has dramatically increased its influence in the country primarily through business, education, and cultural ties.<sup>73</sup> Turkey also played an important role in supporting the more moderate secular Iraqiyya coalition lead by Ayad Allawi during Iraq's recent national election.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Turkey is currently applying its regional influence in coordination with the U.S. and NATO allies in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>75</sup>

Second, a democratic and economically prosperous Turkey can serve as a powerful role model for the political development of other states in the region. Many Middle Eastern states already view Turkey as the exemplar for the successful "synthesis of Islam, democracy, and capitalism".<sup>76</sup> In a recent public opinion poll, 75% of those surveyed in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Saudi Arabia and Syria voiced strong support for Turkey and its blend of Islam and democracy.<sup>77</sup> Successful democracies tend to diffuse political power through political institutions and internal checks and balances.<sup>78</sup> Turkey's current domestic political debate over the role of Islam in Turkish politics and society offers the prospect for accommodation between democratic institutions and strong Islamic social and cultural traditions.

U.S. policy advocates the advancement of democratic principles across the globe, but these policies often do not take into consideration that developing democracies have their own national interests to pursue. With a diffusion of political power comes a diffusion of political interests and advocacy groups that add complexity to political decision making. As noted earlier, the Turkish General Assembly's rejection of the U.S. plan to invade Northern Iraq through southern Turkey in 2003, despite Turkey's long standing alliance with the U.S., is an example of internal political and

economic interests trumping a long standing relationship built around a Cold War strategic framework. Likewise, Turkey's warming relations with Iran and Turkey's efforts to block further economic sanctions over Iran's developing nuclear program seem hard to understand unless one considers Turkey's overarching goal for maintaining stability with its neighbors in the region in order to sustain its economic prosperity.

Third, Turkey can serve as a counter-balance to the growing influence of Iran. For Turkey to achieve its foreign policy objective of becoming a major regional power in the Middle East and Central Asia, it must balance its interests between East and West. This has been the foundation for Ankara's *zero problems* policy with its neighbors and its policy of *strategic depth* in addressing regional concerns. This is also the source for much of the suspicion of Turkey's motives in the West . Turkey's developing ties to Iran offers an instructive example of how Ankara is attempting to walk a fine line with its foreign policy. Turkey needs good relations with Iran in order to promote regional stability; however, Turkey does not support Iran developing nuclear weapons.<sup>79</sup> Turkey hopes to use its new found soft power to help restore Iran as a responsible member of the world community.<sup>80</sup> Turkey also needs good relations with Iran in order to resolve the issue of Kurdish PKK terrorists Turkey believes are operating in the region. Turkey and Iran (along with Syria) have large Kurdish minority populations and share mutual interests in opposing the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq.<sup>81</sup>

Long term, Turkey fears growing Iranian influence in the Middle East and its impact on Turkey's interests as the predominant regional power.<sup>82</sup> A nuclear armed Iran is a threat to regional security and economic stability. Turkey's developing



economic ties across the Middle East and the Arab states in particular offers Turkey an excellent strategic position to successfully contain Iranian influence.<sup>83</sup> The challenge for U.S. policy makers involves understanding the nuances of Ankara's foreign policy interests in general, but particularly with Iran, and working together with the Turks to achieve mutual strategic interests. In the future, Turkey will likely continue to remain engaged in all major regional issues in order to facilitate its continued regional influence. U.S. policy should recognize this fact and take advantage of it to protect the interests of both states.

#### Redefining the U.S.-Turkey strategic Relationship

Turkey has not turned against the West and it has not rejected its traditional partnership with the U.S. The terms of the partnership have simply changed.<sup>84</sup> Turkey continues to be a secular democracy with a population that desires a close relationship with the West. Turkey's long continuing desire to join the European Union (EU) and the national frustration with the glacial EU application process illustrates this fact. The problem for the U.S and its Western allies is that Turkey now has the economic and political clout to chart its own foreign policy course. The U.S. must rethink and restructure its relationship with Turkey based on the new strategic environment. Turkey's growing prosperity and influence can help the U.S. achieve its interests in Central Asia and in the Middle East. As Foreign Minister Davutoglu argues, Turkey can provide the U.S. a regional partner with a depth of strategic experience and insight in the Middle East and Asia.<sup>85</sup> The U.S. – Turkey relationship may be changing, but the two states continue to share many strategic interests and objectives. The U.S. faces three possible options for future relations with Turkey.

First, the U.S. can maintain its current strategic approach to Turkey. This option entails continued U.S. efforts to work through NATO and Turkey's desire to join the EU in order to foster continued cooperation between Turkey and the West. The U.S. must work to convince both sides that it is in their best interest to continue to move toward Turkey's full membership in the EU. As President Obama noted in his address to Turkey's Grand National Assembly in 2009:

The United States strongly supports Turkey's bid to become a member of the European Union. Turkey has been a resolute ally and a responsible partner in transatlantic and European institutions. Europe gains by the diversity of ethnicity, tradition and faith -- it is not diminished by it. And Turkish membership would broaden and strengthen Europe's foundation once more.<sup>86</sup>

Turkey also continues to have much to gain from EU membership. Turkey's desire to join the EU has been the major force behind domestic political and human rights reform in the country.<sup>87</sup> Turkey's joining the EU would send a powerful message to the rest of the Islamic world: Islam and democracy can coexist and can succeed in the modern world.<sup>88</sup> This example is even more important today in light of recent events across the Middle East and North Africa.

U.S. policy in Afghanistan and Iraq has strained U.S. –Turkey relations but not irrevocably. Reduced U.S. troop levels in Iraq and a likely reduced U.S. military role in Afghanistan in 2011 and beyond will reduce many of the friction points between the two states. The U.S. and Turkey continue to maintain a successful level of bilateral military cooperation at the tactical and operational levels. U.S. military and intelligence communities currently work closely with their Turkish partners, particularly in helping Turkey defeat the PKK, a radical Kurdish terrorist organization operating in Southeastern Turkey and Northern Iraq. Despite its differences with the U.S., Turkey

continues to allow U.S. forces to transport nonlethal supplies through its Harbur gate, on Turkey's southern border into Northern Iraq and allow over flight rights for U.S. aircraft transiting between Europe and Iraq.

The risk of simply continuing current U.S. policy involves the likelihood of periodic strains between the two countries based on Turkey's growing desire to chart its own path to regional influence. To this point, Turkey's government has successfully balanced its interests between East and West. Turkey's growing economic and political clout comes at a time when the U.S. has lost influence in the region. Similarly, European resistance to Turkey joining the EU has fueled Turkey's desire to strengthen its relationship with its neighbors in the East. Many Middle Eastern states view Turkey as an alternative to the U.S. and Iran as the key power broker in the region.<sup>89</sup> This fact will continue to prompt Ankara to develop closer ties to its Middle Eastern neighbors and further distance Turkey from the West. Many Western observers, for example, believe Turkey's strong negative reaction to Israel's actions in Gaza signals both a rebuff of Western interests in the Middle East and Turkey's new found confidence to chart its own course with its Muslim neighbors. Once a stalwart ally of Israel, Turkey now seeks a new course more aligned with its strategic interests and the will of the Turkish people.

The second option for the U.S. involves maintaining the current U.S. and Turkey strategic framework while acknowledging Turkey's growing prominence as an independent regional power with an increasingly active foreign policy. Many in the West fear that in strengthening ties to its eastern neighbors Turkey will reject its democratic roots and embrace a more traditionally Islamic path. Turkey in fact wishes to maintain

close relations with both East and West. Turkey sees itself as the traditional meeting point between Europe and Asia. As Turkish scholar, Omer Taspinar, notes, Turkey's "strategic vision and culture reflect the geographic reach of the Ottoman and Byzantine Empires which also embraced both East and West".<sup>90</sup> In fulfilling this key linking role between East and West, Turkey also wishes to merge its Kemalist secular heritage with its equally important Islamic cultural traditions.<sup>91</sup> Turkey ultimately believes this course of action will make the most of both worlds and position Turkey as the major power broker and economic power in Central Asia and the Middle East.

The U.S. should acknowledge Turkey's efforts to balance between East and West. The U.S. should use existing links through NATO and the EU to assist Turkey in its new regional prominence. The overall goal is to prevent Turkey from slipping out of balance politically and weakening its traditional ties to the West. The U.S. should redouble its efforts to support Turkey's membership in the EU. This will strengthen pro-Western sentiment in the country and create a formal linkage between Turkey and Europe. U.S. support for Turkey's EU membership will also continue to fuel political reforms inside of Turkey and thus reinforce Turkey's democratic institutions. In the development of U.S. policies in the region, the U.S. should closely consult with Turkey to ensure Turkey's support for shared strategic objectives. Like the U.S., Turkey benefits from political and economic stability in the region.<sup>92</sup> U.S. policy should recognize Turkey's influence and interests in the region and attempt to reconcile differences over policy through the existing U.S. – Turkey strategic framework. The U.S. continues to maintain viable influence in Ankara. The challenge in following this option involves resistance in Europe and the United States in taking steps promoting

Turkey's growing regional influence. Many European governments and members of the U.S. Congress believe Turkey is already sliding away from its secular democratic past. U.S. efforts alone are unlikely to overcome European doubts over Turkey's application to join the EU. Leaders in both the U.S. and Europe must gain a more nuanced understanding of Turkey's internal politics and growing influence in the region for this to be a suitable policy option.

The risk for this option again involves reduced U.S. influence over Turkey in the new post 9/11 strategic environment. Turkey will continue to strengthen its ties to Iran, Russia, and its Middle Eastern neighbors. This fact will invariably create tensions with the U.S. and Europe. Turkey's improved relationship with its regional neighbors has already fueled European resistance to Turkish EU membership. A failed Turkish bid to join the EU would likely push Turkey to look for stronger ties with Russia, Iran, and other Middle Eastern neighbors.<sup>93</sup> Turkey's strong opposition to Israeli policy in Gaza and the fallout from deaths of several Turkish citizens in an Israeli commando raid against a vessel attempting to dock in Gaza carrying relief supplies has severely strained Turkey's relationship with Israel and the West. The existing strategic ties between the U.S. and Turkey may not be strong enough to endure continued stresses.

A third and final option advocates a new approach to the U.S. – Turkey partnership. Current U.S. policy in Central Asia and the Middle East continues to function under the old Cold War bipolar dynamic where states are categorized as loyal allies or opponents. The post 9/11 strategic environment is more complex. Rising regional powers such as Turkey will continue to advocate foreign policy goals reflecting more diverse national interests. Based on Turkey's growing stature in a strategically

vital region, the U.S. should develop a relationship with Turkey based on the traditional U.S. – Israel bilateral relationship.<sup>94</sup> The U.S. and Israel have developed a strategic framework with mechanisms for routine bilateral consultation and cooperation based on mutual interests. Turkey can play a similarly important role in Central Asia and the Middle East. A strengthened U.S. - Turkey strategic partnership will allow the U.S. more flexibility in coordinating with Turkey and other growing regional states in achieving common goals.<sup>95</sup>

U.S. policy should not only promote cooperation and consultation at the political level but also at the military, cultural and educational levels, again based on the U.S.- Israel model. Strengthening U.S.-Turkey relations across the social spectrum will reinforce Turkey's ties to the West, shore up sagging pro-American and pro-Western sentiment in Turkey and will encourage further democratic reforms in Turkey. U.S. policy should work to identify shared strategic interests with Turkey and develop mechanisms to develop approaches to achieve shared goals that are suitable to both States. This option supports American values by strengthening democratic values in Turkey and limiting the influence of Islamic extremists. A democratic and prosperous Turkey will continue to serve as a model for other states in the region to follow thus promoting the U.S. objective of a more democratic and stable Middle East and Central Asia. Developing a bilateral relationship with Turkey based on the U.S.-Israel model is feasible. As with Israel, the U.S shares important national interests with Turkey and maintains an already strong strategic foundation to build a new partnership.

Successfully strengthening the U.S.-Turkey strategic partnership offers the potential for the U.S. to reduce its military foot print in the region which would

substantially reduce the risk of opposition from European and regional allies. An additional important factor in favor of this option is that execution involves a slow, evolution in the relationship between Turkey and the U.S. No dramatic change on the surface is needed. Once bilateral mechanisms are in place, both states will benefit. Turkey's democratic institutions and links to the West will remain strong and the U.S. population and its leaders will gain a growing appreciation and understanding of Turkey's unique history and potential power as a regional ally for the U.S.

### Conclusion

The United States experienced fundamental changes to the geostrategic environment during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 9/11 attacks demonstrated the growing threat of Islamic extremists and their ability to attack the U.S. homeland. Military challenges in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, illustrate the limits of American military power in an increasingly multi-polar world. The United States must look to rebalance its overall foreign policy approach in order to maintain its influence as a world power. Part of this rebalancing involves developing new relationships with growing regional powers such as Turkey, Brazil, Indonesia, India, and South Africa that share many of the same values and interests as the United States.

In the case of Turkey, U.S. policy should encourage Turkey's active foreign policy and use of newly acquired soft power. A strong Turkey that continues to value secular democratic ideals can be a powerful stabilizing influence in the Central Asia and Middle East regions. Policy should advocate new mechanisms facilitating bilateral contact at all levels of Turkish and American societies. For example, the Turkish military and Army in particular would benefit significantly from increased bilateral military

to military exercises and training with the U.S. military.<sup>96</sup> In the aftermath of the fall of the Mubarak regime, it seems the close relationship between the Egyptian military and their U.S. counterparts had a moderating influence on the transition of power. A similarly close military relationship between the U.S. and Turkey would have a similar affect. Business and educational exchange programs would have a similar positive impact on Turkish and U.S. society.<sup>97</sup> This option would empower Turkey as a strong regional partner sharing the U.S. commitment to democratic values and economic stability in the region. Establishing a new partnership with Turkey recognizing its new role as a regional power will not be easy for the U.S. Sharing power is never a simple process. The benefit, however, is worth the effort. “The United States and Turkey have not always agreed on every issue, and that's to be expected -- no two nations do. But we have stood together through many challenges over the last sixty years. And because of the strength of our alliance and the endurance of our friendship, both America and Turkey are stronger and the world is more secure”<sup>98</sup>. With hard work and understanding a renewed friendship and even stronger strategic alliance can serve both the U.S. and Turkey for the next sixty years and beyond.

## Endnotes

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